

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 001183

SIPDIS

CA/OCS/ACS/NESA, DS/OP/NEA, DS/DSS/ITA AND
SA/INS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [CASC](#) [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [ECON](#) [NP](#)

SUBJECT: Consular Visit Assesses Conditions Outside
Kathmandu Valley

Refs: A) Kathmandu 209 B) Kathmandu 747 C) Kathmandu

751

1. Summary. Consul and Consular Assistant completed a five-day road trip last week to assess concerns about the safety of AmCit travel outside the Kathmandu Valley given the continuing Maoist insurgency, surveying primary travel routes and remote destinations frequented by American citizens. The consular team held two well-attended warden meetings with AmCits living outside the Valley, met with emergency service providers and established contacts with key Government of Nepal (GON) officials at the district level. The Americans visited, many of whom have been in Nepal's hinterlands for several years, expressed deep gratitude for the meetings and asked many security-related questions. Some told of encounters with Maoists, but none reported threats, major incidents of harassment or anti-American sentiment in those encounters. The primary road travel danger outside the Valley continues to be from busses and freight trucks careening around the precarious curves of Nepal's highways. End Summary.

2. The consular team's road trip covered 800 kms from May 30 - June 3 with stops at the two most frequented destinations for foreign travelers outside Kathmandu Valley as well as a remote medical clinic staffed by Americans and operated by INGO United Mission to Nepal. In the process, the team drove through 12 of Nepal's 75 districts. Our Embassy plated vehicle was waved through all but two of the numerous police and army check posts along the route. The only direct evidence of Maoist violence encountered was the burned-out hulk of a freight truck in Chaugidhar Village, Dhading District, bombed by Maoists during April's bandh.

POKHARA

3. The first stop was Pokhara, Nepal's second most popular tourist destination (after Kathmandu Valley) and entry point for the Annapurna trekking and climbing routes. Hoteliers, restaurateurs and merchants in this usually bustling town bemoaned a grim tourist season. Pokhara's 300 plus hotels were mostly empty. Admittedly, we arrived after the end of the high tourist season, but year-by-year comparisons indicate a dramatic drop in Western visitors. Aside from some Indian tourists, our estimate (confirmed by the local AmCit hotel owner who hosted our American citizens meeting) was that less than 300 Westerners were visiting Pokhara during our stay.

4. A lively wardens meeting, lasting over two hours, was held in Pokhara on May 31. Discussion of the Maoist situation, the incidents underlying the May 16 Public Announcement and Indo-Pak tensions dominated the meeting attended by 19 Americans plus 2 European representatives of INGOs with American volunteers. Consul dispelled CNN reports of a USG decision to "evacuate" all American citizens throughout South Asia in the wake of the then escalating Indo-Pak conflict and carefully discussed procedures that might be taken in the event a worsening security situation led to a decision to advise Americans to depart Nepal. We distributed a packet of information with emergency contacts, emergency and crisis procedures, Q&As about evacuation and suggested contents for a "go kit".

5. One American NGO volunteer reported that Maoists stopped him while riding his bicycle to work during the last bandh and asked where he was going. He was told he could go to a friend's house, but that it was "not OK" to go to his office. After the meeting, several individuals remarked that no official Embassy meeting for Americans in Pokhara had been held for some time and expressed thankfulness for the visit, especially in the present difficult times.

6. While in Pokhara, the consular team held several other very productive meetings, at hospitals, with the

Chief District Officer and with emergency service providers. Perhaps most important were our consultations with the local managers of Karnali Air and Fish Tail Air, who regularly assist us with emergency helicopter rescues in the Annapurna region. We learned that helicopters must stop in Pokhara for refueling in most evacuation scenarios to Kathmandu because they must operate on minimum fuel to operate safely and land at high altitudes, especially in high winds. We also learned that, due to recent crashes and the contracting of one Dynasty Air helicopter for exclusive use by the Armed Police in Nepalgunj, the "fleet" of available commercial rescue helicopters for Nepal has been reduced to 7. Only Karnali Air will continue to pre-position a helicopter in Pokhara. Lack of demand in the Everest region coupled with the decreased number of helicopters nationwide means the helicopters that had been pre-positioned in Lukla have been pulled -- and they are unlikely to return for the fall tourist season. Emergency medevacs of trekkers and climbers, operating chiefly from Kathmandu, will now take longer. [Note: On the day of our meeting an Asian Airlines MI-17 helicopter was lost en route from Mount Makalu to Lukla.]

United Mission to Nepal Visit

17. On June 1, the team proceeded over Syangya District's torturous mountain roads to the Tansen Mission Hospital operated by the inter-denominational INGO United Mission to Nepal (UMN). UMN's 240 expat staff (including 71 Americans) manage hospitals, clinics, engineering and development projects in remote locations throughout Nepal. The hospital in Tansen, UMN's largest, has served Nepalis in this isolated region continuously for more than 40 years, treating cases of Japanese encephalitis, meningitis and diarrhea, as well as surgeries, road accidents and maternity emergencies. During our visit, the 190-bed hospital was over capacity, with beds spread through the hallways.

18. We held an informal wardens meeting over dinner with the 14 Americans (including family members) and one nun who is a U.S. permanent resident, discussing the current security situation and procedures in the event of an emergency. The Americans present felt concern about their isolated location and the availability of assistance in the event of an evacuation. There is a serviceable helipad adjacent to the hospital. One recent American arrival brought a satellite telephone, and we made arrangements for an emergency test upon our return. As we heard in Pokhara, the Americans in Tansen reported that Maoist-called general strikes (bandhs) are strictly observed in their locale.

19. The group reported very good relations with the local community, the accumulation of 40 years of good will, and no Maoist threats. However, two UMN clinics in other locations did receive threats last year, one of which had to be evacuated. Maoists approached the hospital director, an American who has served in Tansen for 12 years, for "donations" once last fall. He told the Maoists that the hospital could not give money and that the Maoists should go to individuals in the community rather than the institution. He was never approached again. He also stated that UMN's operations in some other districts were being scaled back or curtailed because of the security situation.

Chitwan and Return

10. Early the following morning, the consular tour descended into the plains region (Terai) on Nepal's southern border with India and stopped at the Royal Chitwan National Park, one of the world's few remaining habitats for tigers and other endangered species. Chitwan District has experienced several sporadic incidents of Maoist violence since hostilities renewed in November. Nightly charges at the top of the line resort in Chitwan were \$325 per night before the dramatic tourist downturn. Now, in attempts to increase occupancy, its management is quietly approaching residents and others with a "special" \$75 rate, elephant safari and naturalist walks included. Even with the incentives, lack of guests has caused that lodge and most others in Chitwan Park to close prematurely for the summer. All but core maintenance staff are on forced, unpaid leave until whenever it becomes cost effective to reopen in the fall.

11. A useful meeting took place with Chitwan District's acting Chief District Officer (CDO) in Bharatpur, Kamal Kanta Regmi. He offered to assist with any welfare and whereabouts requests (we'd had one supposedly lost group

of American university students in that district the previous week). Regmi also offered to take the addresses of all Americans in Chitwan District and "check-in" with them -- an offer we politely declined. He stated that, although he cannot predict the future, Maoist violence in Chitwan has thus far been directed chiefly against individuals (as opposed to institutions or government offices). [Note: Reftels detail recent Maoist attacks on Coca-Cola's plant Chitwan.] In any case, Mr. Regmi promised to provide all possible assistance in any case involving American citizens.

12 Road travel on Nepal circuitous, narrow highways is treacherous and grueling. Although we never covered more than 200 kms on any day, every day's drive involved a minimum of six hours. Along the way, we witnessed the aftermath of 20 major head-on collisions, more often than not between busses and large carriage trucks. Throughout the routes taken, the GON is installing large squares of rocks encased with thick wire mesh (similar to the landslide protection blocks) on the cliffside of the highway as barriers to prevent vehicles from going over the edge. As we approached Kathmandu toward nightfall on June 3, we witnessed numerous Westerners on "night busses" headed toward Pokhara, despite explicit warnings in Nepal's Consular Information Sheet.

13. Conclusion: This consular tour assisted the Embassy's efforts to monitor the security situation on the main highways utilized by Western travelers to Nepal and to apprise Americans living and working in two major remote locations of the present security situation. The hundreds of Nepalis we encountered throughout the journey welcomed us with the genuine warmth that characterizes the people of this country, as we openly spoke of ourselves as Americans and about America's great friendship with Nepal. The experience gained during this visit to remote areas reinforces the Embassy's evaluation that, barring a change in Maoist tactics, responsible travel on the main tourist routes outside the Kathmandu Valley does not pose any undue security risk from terrorism or criminal violence.

Malinowski